Tilghman Island
September 1, 1970

Dear Joe,

Your letter doesn't say when you return, so I'll wing this off to England from this unlikely isle, and perhaps pass you out over the Atlantic.

We can talk about publishing books (yours and/or mine) when you return. I don't think that I have a book of essays, and certainly don't have the courage for one. I am fearfully fearful, and the hit-and-run of magazines suits my mood of evading capture. Boy did I feel sympathy with Father Berrigan on the run from FBI and others: now he knows what I feel like!

Notes from the Underground: I read Ancient History just Prior to coming down here but didn't bring it with me. I did, luckily, bring some of my notes on satire to think about in another connection, and after thinking of Al and Bob as City Mouse and Country Mouse, find that (if my notes are accurate) Dryden's The Hind and the Panther was ridiculed by Montague and Prior as City Mouse and Country Mouse. And since I was already thinking that the period for me to think about to understand you would be after the Metaphysicals and before the Augustans, like to read up on Sir Robert Howard or to reread Dryden's Of Dramatick Poesie, I suspect that you may know too much for me to catch up with your references.

A.H. is, for me, overwhelmingly close and real; C. scares me. The book is certainly the fulfillment of much of what I have been thinking about, and we can talk about that. I do not understand some facets of it; it may be comic in a sense which I don't catch. R. M. Adams liked the sort of sociological satire in H's K, yet it bothered me, because in so far as it was satiric, some ideal might have been defined in behalf behalf of which the satire was working (no such ideals being self-evident as they might have been to Dryden). So the satiric tone seemed to me on-again off-again, with no reassuringly certain commitment, even as Hind flirts with everyone disconcertingly, until he discovers his commitments: but of course the book is about this, and the variable tone, shading into the facetious or absurd, is representing a reality which shades into the absurd. I certainly couldn't settle on a tone or attitude toward SDS, which is unsettling, which may be the appropriate response. Now in A.H. I have the same or a similar feeling that there are no ideals to which there can be sufficient commitment to sustain a crisp satire, and not enough Mad-comic absurdity to justify black comedy, yet a distortion of actuality not toward an ideal but toward an absurdity: that is, C.'s pseudo-anthro-sociological language and pursuits. C. is not thinking about the meaning of past events as Freudian causative, he is thinking about their relations and interrelations in a pattern--who was where when and in what relations to others?--so that the past is a criss-cross

of the coordinates of relations, and each affection is like a cluster of perplexed implications in a field: the field is created by the relations between the relations, the relations of A to B to C, and so on. What is difficult here is the curiously elusive dryness of C. in his friendships, and the use of mock-jargon in anthrosociological analysis, which iimplies that the intellectaal structure is for the purpose of preserving the precise, vividly colored facts, such as the color of Gail's suitease (olive, I think, like that boy'sattache case in H'sK.) But could the facts be preserved without the mock-jargon, and what would they mean? The book, which I wish I had at hand, mentions the crisis of commitment in relation to field, and this crisis, which I think C. recognizes in D., explains and justifies the tone. Yet C. still seems so outside his own relationships that he seems to have anthropology as his field, and not to be of the field he remembers and eludes by staying upstairs when A. and B. are about to intersect. This may be the very problem of uncertainty and objectivity which anyone would understand is serious; what bothers me is a feeling that some joke is in progress that I am not understanding. How deeply is the self-satiric edge in C.'s tone cutting?

I paused to take three fish out of the icebox (I'm glad C. calls it that too).

The tone is elusive, then, because when not serious, it isn't clearly not serious, and isn't decidedly satiric. While I am thinking out loud (I just put the fish on) let me approach this another way: S'B had a commanding metaphor which contained it. A.H. is working with an uncontained composition, and without metaphor commanding structure, and both uncontainment and non-metaphor are non-hierarchical, that is, are deflating of hierarchy. A deflated hierarchy leaves behind it Field. The ghost of deflated or collapsed hierarchies remains: Cyrus was a king: the ghostly demarcations of hierarchy cannot sustain a sustained satire: all equations are in doubt. And within the field, new hierarchies will emerge, there are positions of power and influence in spite of flexibility, mobility, spontaneity, etc. So the withdrawal of metaphor leaves the ghost of old metaphors and hierarchies standing, but all that is so much Ancient History. The old hierarchies seemed supported by commitment; field seems sustained by doubt: that is, lest rigid commitment rigidify field into hierarchy. (I ate my fish: three delicious spot). So the tension between C.'s metaphor and his field, his commitment of facts to memory in history, and his attentive doubt in his field, anthro-soc. Isn't he trying to get out of metaphor/symbol meaning, and into relations and relation-to-relation, meaning? So the problem seems precisely described: commitment to field can destroy the doubt and uncertainty which are inherent in its structure(even as the repeated mentions of field can become a recurrent motif pulling field into a metaphor as in Mailer: "That same field of force had come on me ~~here~~/ as I left Deborah's body on the floor..."--I just read American Dream). It is C.'s attitude toward his field--metaphor for profession--that seems right but so elusive.

Joe: These are first thoughts on the 1st of September. I hope their tone is clear: full of wonder at your achievement. I have to go now to fetch the children who have been with a babysitter this morning, Miss Mary, who miraculously has three tiny dogs, talk about equitable distributions of energy and attention. I am not rested; I am in some curious way tired of myself down here, not quite out of some old skin, not ready for NYC, autumn, or Queens. Not up to Chaucer. We may not return to NY until the last minute: I'll call when we're back in our dirt, dust, and pollution.

I was reading my notes on satire, in relation to my great unpublished essay, and after having thought about your tone in relation to Hobbes definition of the proper object of satire as the urban population, because of "an insincereness, inconstancy, and a troublesome humour," I noted that he had called this the aerial realm, because the people in the city were like the air in the city (insincere, inconstant, troublesome), and thought of you and your Dewey Wood bus fumes, Selectronair and general theme of troublesome airs. He also called this Scommatic, which could be the same of an anti-scum device. The air at Tilghman is plain, untarnished, with a salty-fishy tang. I want a job doing light housekeeping in a light house.

From a pastoral air,

Bill